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Kantei diplomacy? Japan's hybrid leadership in foreign and security policy

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Abstract

This article operationalizes Japanese leadership in foreign and security policy, specific the Abe administrations' consistent China balancing. It will do so to dispel instances of Premier-centered diplomacy and posit that Abe's diplomatic agenda has rested on a 'hybrid' policy-making authority, where the leverage enjoyed by the Prime Minister's office (the Kantei) rested on little-appreciated politicized personnel appointments and demotions within the bureaucratic apparatus, specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, successful Japanese leadership has functioned especially when operating within the scope of the US strategic framework towards East Asia. While structural constraints, such as the ever-present influence of the US and bureaucratic coordination may constrain options, effective leadership in foreign policy-making can indeed make a difference within those boundaries.

Keywords: Foreign Policymaking; Japan; Leadership; Japan-China; Abe Shinzō; Japan-US.

1. The Question of Leadership in Japanese Foreign and Security Policy

Abe Shinzō's comeback to the center-stage of Japanese politics in December 2012 coincided with the reprise and deepening of the very security and diplomatic agenda he and his foreign policy taskforce initiated back in 2006. Abe's presidential style of leadership and his selection of the same hand-picked foreign policy executive underline the undisputed role of human agency, with its idiosyncrasies and cognitive structure, in the Japanese decision-making process. After all, Abe 2.0 also reprised the language register of Abe 1.0 along a 'declarative foreign policy' that trumpeted the primacy of universal values, democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of navigation. But were these changes a result of Abe's proactive leadership, in line with his self-professed admiration for 'pugnacious politicians' (Abe, 2006a: 3)? On the basis of a variety of primary sources, including elite interviews, leaked US State Department cables, memoirs, newspaper articles and official documentation, this article looks inside the penumbra of the policy-making process to operationalize Abe's leadership in foreign and security policy. It will do so to complicate the picture and advance a more nuanced conceptualization of Japanese leadership in foreign and security policy, one that includes the incubator role of the United States and of a personalized link with the bureaucratic apparatus.

The question of Japanese leadership has loomed large in the study of its decision-making system. Classic studies of Japan's foreign policy have neglected the role of the Japanese Prime Minister, focusing instead on structural approaches, either in their domestic or international declination. With regard to the former, scholars have emphasized the specific role of the specialized bureaucracy, of the intra-ruling party decision making system (led by the Policy Affairs Research Councils), and of the holistic 'iron triangle' model, according to which interplay and interests carried by the business, bureaucratic and political world constitute the engine behind the Japanese policy-making machine (Johnson, 1982). The attention devoted to institutions, consensus, and *nemawashi* –or extensive consultations– has conversely downplayed individual agency. Moreover, analyses that highlight the stifling role of domestic institutions and process over vision and strategy often run parallel to the notion of a non-existent –or at best passive– Japanese foreign policy, essentially reactive to decisions made by the country's major ally and hegemonic power, the US (Calder, 1988). Domestic structural analyses have often characterized Tokyo's leadership in foreign and security policy at worst passive, at best reactive, but in both cases impersonal and consensus-driven.

Other scholars have understood Japan's foreign policy behavior within the equally stifling framework of structural theories of International Relations. According to these, an often anthropomorphized Japanese state is highly susceptible to international changes in the distribution of power and interests, or to the domestic and/or international penetration of particular ideas and identities, in line with the three great IR theoretical paradigms: Neo-realism, Neo-liberalisms and Constructivism. Kenneth Waltz's seminal study on international politics influenced an analytical approach to Japan's foreign policy that favors international structures and so-called third-level analysis (Waltz, 1979). Interestingly, prominent scholars have often wedded domestic with external structures: Kenneth Pyle's brilliant historical overview of a cohesive Japanese political elite strategically susceptible to changes in the international distribution of power is a case in point (Pyle, 2007). Not by chance, it transposes Waltz' approach to the study of Japan's international relations throughout its bi-millennarian history, where the Japanese elite has been keen in adjusting along changes in the distribution of power.

Other authors have presented an open-ended interaction between international structures with domestic debates on foreign and security policy. Richard Samuels and Narushige Michishita's studies leave space for human agency, but the 'Goldilock leader' that will pursue a strategy of

double hedging of maintaining the US-Japan alliance while deepening Japan's economic enmeshment with Beijing is a political leader and a reflection of the domestic debate (Samuels, 2006; Michishita et al., 2012). In other words, their analysis emphasizes the role of the Prime Minister as a representative of the consensus among the political elite, thus stressing Morton Halperin's quip that "where you sit is where you stand."

This article aims at underlining, instead, the prominent role of personality alone that does not act in tandem with the domestic political debate, but is the reflection of deep-seated ideological beliefs, a proven driver of human behavior (Goldstein et al., 1993). Institutional overhaul in Japan has allowed such change. Following electoral and administrative reforms in the 1990s, scholars' interest in prime ministerial leadership returned to prominence. Following the 1997 *Big Bang* administrative reforms by Prime Minister (PM) Hashimoto Ryūtarō, major institutional and legal sources of power have become available at the PM's disposal under a top-down decision making process centered in the *Kantei*, the Prime Minister's Office (Shinoda, 2007). These institutional reforms have, in turn, emboldened leaders to push for divisive diplomatic decisions. Indeed, Abe's security agenda, one that was preoccupied with the resuscitation of initiatives aimed at recovering Great Power status, balancing more forcefully China's rise and at augmenting the coercive tools at Tokyo's disposal has lead political scientist Christopher W. Hughes to point at the dawn of an Abe Doctrine (Hughes, 2015: 8-27).

Yet, the new literature on Japanese leadership misses the enduring bureaucratic and US link that considerably aided *Kantei*-led diplomatic change. This article advances a 'hybrid model of Japanese leadership', where efficient leadership rests on an increasingly personalized and politicized link between *Kantei*, the US and the bureaucratic apparatus. To advance this claim, this study tests the role of specific foreign policies pursued by the seemingly presidential Abe administrations against the backdrop of very similar international and domestic structural constraints. Apart from introducing the role of prominent bureaucrats in the picture, preliminary evidence disproves both an eminently structuralist and an essentially agent-centered understanding of leadership in contemporary Japan, in favor of the above-mentioned 'hybrid leadership.' While structural constraints, such as the ever-present influence of the US and bureaucratic coordination may constrain options, effective leadership in foreign policy-making can indeed make a difference *within* those boundaries.

2. Enter the Dragons: China and Abe Shinzō's Ascendance

This article uses the Abe administrations' China policy –specifically their consistent balancing policy– as a case study to operationalize Japanese prime-ministerial leadership. In fact, China's staggering economic and military rise caused tremendous fluidity in the regional environment, in turn augmenting the impact of individual leadership in Japan. Deep Sino-Japanese economic interdependence, a profound reciprocal cultural and technological debt,² and the need to tackle common traditional and non-traditional transnational security threats, albeit to varying degrees, are counterbalanced by unresolved territorial disputes, a growing security threat resulting from China's military rise, possible competition for energy resources, and reciprocal misunderstanding, rooted in bilateral historical and identity perception gaps. For the above reasons, the China question has loomed large in Japanese security debates during the post-Cold War years, becoming *the* foreign policy issue of the early 21st Century – as evidenced by an ever growing number of publications on China's rise and on bilateral relations, which are typically titled or subtitled 'how to confront/face China' (*Chūgoku to dō tsukiau/mukiau no ka?*) (Miyamoto, 2010; Matsuda, 2010; Kokubun, 2011). The answers raised in this lively debate have varied, and scholars have attempted to delineate the contours of the foreign policy discourse reflecting this above complex landscape (Mochizuki, 2007, Michishita et alia, 2012). As summarized by Asano Ryō, '[in] the 2000s China's rise and estimations of a changed power balance in East Asia prompted Tokyo to undertake new initiatives: an East Asian Community, efforts at avoiding collisions with China, as well as a more realistic (i.e. pragmatic and Realist) foreign policy' (Interview, 2014a). But Abe and his foreign policy executive knew all along that China's military ascendance and its progressive advancement into the seas qualified as the long-term threat to Japanese security.

Within the broader strategic context of a multipolar regional order, this article argues that Abe aimed at a maximalist security agenda –maximalist by Japan's standards– along his own personal idiosyncrasies. China's military rise prompted Japan's security revolution and Abe tackled China's growing military clout through external and internal balancing: the former aimed at deepening Japan's security relations with strategic states, first and foremost the US, the latter

² Up until the pre-modern age, Japan benefited and was greatly influenced by Chinese cultural and political institutions, as well as Chinese religious and political thought. The same could be said of China's debt to Japan's early modernization process in the late 19th Century. That and Japan's so-called "developmental state" model influenced, respectively, the birth of China as a modern nation state and China's transition from a plan to a market-oriented economy with strong state interventionism.

centered on expanding the scope of Japan's own power projection and, in connection to that, augmenting the centralized foreign and security policy-making capabilities centered in the *Kantei*, the Prime Minister's office. But what role did the bureaucratic apparatus and the US government play in the formulation and implementation of these policies? To disentangle the complex genealogy of Abe's bold security agenda, the next sections map Abe's ideological outlook to define his foreign and security policy optima. Subsequently, I 'place personality in the context of the process of political causation, weighing up the respective impact of individual and contextual factors' (Hill, 2003: 109-110) in order to better understand the Japanese policy-making process along the aforementioned contours. Shortly, the article demonstrates the 'hybrid leadership' model through a rigorous process tracing of the external balancing of Abe 1.0 and Abe 2.0. The process tracing rests on extensive use of primary sources, where elite interviews have undergone extensive triangulation to substantiate the claims presented.

2.1 Abe Shinzō, an Idealist Power Balancer

Abe's nationalist outlook and his upbringing in the heart of the Liberal Democratic Party's establishment facilitated his ascendance to the front stage of Japan's political scene. He briefly entered the world of politics in 1982 as the secretary to then-Foreign Minister Abe Shintarō, his father. Following his father's death in 1991, Abe inherited his father's political machine and support groups. Thus, Abe *de facto* inherited the electoral constituency of Yamaguchi's first multimember Single Non-Transferrable Vote district. Following his election in 1993, he won every subsequent House of Representatives election. Abe relied heavily on his Yamaguchi, or Chōshū, heritage to kill two birds with one stone: the prefecture gave Abe a political platform to rise in the ranks of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) but it also enabled him to develop an identity as a nationalistic politician with a claim to historical legitimacy.

As a member of the foreign affairs policy tribe (*zoku*), Abe Shinzō devoted a considerable amount of attention to foreign and defense policy issues from the inception of his Dietary carrier. Moreover, Abe's acquaintance with late Ambassador Okazaki Hisahiko in the early 1990s sparked the flame of interest into a strategic *Realpolitik* that was accompanied by a markedly strong distrust of communist China (Abe et alia, 2006: 160-165; Interview, 2013a). Indeed, Abe's interest for security matters transpires not only through his personal manifestos and writings, but also through diplomatic briefings that detail his hands-on approach already during his tenure as Koizumi

Junichirō's Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary between 2001 and 2004, and as Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS) between 2004 and 2006, often in tandem with FM Asō, but certainly at the expenses of the overtly-lionized Koizumi (US Embassy in Tokyo 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d; US Embassy in Seoul, 2006). Direct authoritative testimonies confirm this important detail. For instance, then-US National Security Council (NSC) Director for Asian Affairs Michael J. Green once recalled: "Koizumi first introduced Abe as his chosen lieutenant, stating: 'Abe is my guy, who really understands security'. So, Koizumi didn't focus on the small pieces a whole lot, Abe did, or Fukuda did. Moreover, Abe would talk quite often of the China threat" (Interview, 2013b). This recollection testifies not only to Abe's ideological penchants but to the growing clout of the Cabinet Secretariat, in line with the afore-mentioned Hashimoto-led administrative reforms. At the relatively young age of 52 Abe capitalized on his political pedigree, on Koizumi's support and on his *Kantei* experience to become Premier in September 2006. It was all the more indicative of the CCS' newly found authority that Abe had never headed a ministry prior to his appointment as LDP President, unlike virtually all of his predecessors. Institutional change and political blue blood considerably helped Abe.

Indeed, Abe's policy preferences are relatively easy to discern, because his pedigree boosted his career, but also regimented his ideological contours. He echoed his maternal grandfather's figure, former Premier Kishi Nobusuke, who dominates Abe's writings, outweighing his father (Abe, 2006: 19-24, 28-31, 80-85, 135-136). Kishi was a prominent member of the intra-Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) nationalist stream, which stood for policies of grand design aimed at reasserting Japan's autonomy and identity (*shutai-sei*), a concept that often recurs in Abe's writings. Concretely, these entailed an insistence on the exceptionalism of Japanese identity, one that remarked its primacy in Asia and its estrangement from the West, and a progressive detachment from the legacy of the US occupation of Japan, including the enduring dependency embedded in the unequal Trans-Pacific alliance (Magosaki, 2012: 187-208). In all likelihood, it was Abe's privileged background and his cocooned political career that nurtured his right-wing idealism and shielded it from the harsh realities of political compromise, thus feeding into a consistent foreign and security policy agenda.

Indeed, Abe Shinzō's broader foreign and defense policy thinking presents striking similarities with his grandfather's (Pugliese, 2014). Specific to Japan's place in the world, Abe assigned explicit prominence to the 'homework left by the Kishi cabinet' (Abe, 2006b: 45); that is

constitutional amendment or, at the very least, the reinterpretation of the Constitution's Pacifist Article 9. This would allow Japan the right to rearm, and have a more equal partnership with the US by exercising the right of collective self-defense. But the second-step, his long term goal, was to 'break away from the post-war regime' (*senjo rejimu kara no dakkyaku*), with a recovery of full-fledged independence and agency with the re-writing of the whole Constitution.

Indicative of the similarities with Kishi's two-step approach, during the first administration Abe consistently strengthened the Trans-pacific alliance scope also by swiftly implementing the previously agreed road map for realignment of US forces in Japan, and by aiming at reinterpreting the US-Japan Defense Guidelines for Cooperation (Abe, 2006a: 109-140; Hughes et alia, 2007:157-158). But the mainstay of Abe's agenda was the *ad hoc* quadrilateral security framework (henceforth, quad) with the US, Australia, and India (Abe 2006a: 157-161). Because, differently from Kishi's times, Abe understood a military-rising China as Japan's foremost strategic problem; under the first Abe administration, explicit reference of the quad in a joint bilateral Japan-India statement became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)'s 'top negotiating priority [as] PM Abe had directly requested the inclusion of such language' with the ill-concealed aim of negotiating with China on a position of strength (US Embassy in Tokyo, 2006e).

Abe's toolkit to domesticate an ascending China was a very traditional one: balancing. He explicitly betrayed his preference for China sticks over carrots in his manifesto book's chapter devoted to 'Japan, Asia and China' (*soshite Chūgoku*), which subtly disparaged Japan's neighbor from its very title. Here Abe denounces the problems and internal deficiencies of the supposedly egalitarian system under Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule (Abe, 2006a: 145-161). On the contrary, he complains in his manifesto book about the tendency among Japan's China-connoisseurs to become enamored with the mainland's long history and culture, thus impeding clear thinking on the issues a nationalistic and military rising China poses to Japan (Abe, 2006a:156-157). His antipathy against China hands will have implications for China policymaking.

Finally, Abe's re-discovery of and insistence on Japan's democratic identity –Asia's oldest– was a nationalistic goal in direct relation with autocratic China's rise to regional economic primacy. But these values didn't likely match the Premier's conservative political philosophy, according to which individual rights rested on the primacy of a strong nation-state capable of safeguarding them. Values were epiphenomenal window dressing to the broader undercurrents of power politics.

Christopher Hughes underscored the stiff ideological quality of Abe's foreign policy as a rupture, qualifying it as a contradictions-ridden doctrine aimed at the recovery of Japan's great power status. Moreover, while Abe aims at encircling China, it ends up being isolated (Hughes, 2015). Sebastian Maslow, instead, contextualized Abe 2.0's foreign and security policy change within the broader evolution of Japan's security system, and qualified Abe-diplomacy as one of 'China hedging' (Maslow, 2014; Maslow, 2015). Finally, Paul Midford has been more sanguine on the implications of Abe's security reforms: he has stressed continuity and downplayed the prospects of Japan's more active engagement in regional power politics, specifically the South China Sea (Midford, 2015). Yet, these authors fail to notice the centrality of the China question to nationalist Abe as a driver of policy change; to the eyes of prominent Japanese right-wing revisionists like Abe, China qualified not just as Japan's main security threat, as testified by Green, but also as a rising source of Japan's political and identity emasculation. China was at the center of the debate, and, as mentioned elsewhere, Abe's quest for a powerful and proud Japan went hand-in-hand with his desire to more autonomously address the many challenges posed by it (Pugliese, 2015b).

2.2 Validating Policy Beliefs: Abe's Security Policy Successes and Lessons Learnt

In tandem with bolstering Japan's home-bred military and security capabilities and defense posture, Abe 1.0 and 2.0 sought to confront China by deepening and widening the net of Japan's security ties with other states. The new Abe administration took up the geopolitical strategy nominally inaugurated by Foreign Minister Asō Tarō in autumn of 2006, the so-called Arc of Freedom and Prosperity. This was briefly rebranded as Japan's Asia Security Diamond and later it was raised to a global strategy, the Foreign Policy based on a Panoramic Perspective of the World-Map (*chikyū zentai o fukan suru gaikō*) (Yachi, 2013). Concretely, these initiatives entailed geopolitical overtures to maritime states in the peripheries of the Eurasian continent. The aim was to establish a network of Sea Powers along the Eastern portion of the Eurasian rimland, on the belief that naval powers, such as India and Australia, were essential in keeping in check the Chinese continental power's advancement into the seas.

Yet, the first Abe government's focus on national security and foreign policy issues gave an image of a leader detached from mounting economic and social problems, contributing to his early resignation in 2007. Abe learnt from his previous government mistakes that he needed to focus on

bread-and-butter issues to gain popular support at home, particularly given general antipathy for his security agenda. Thus, Abe's comeback premised on the *Abenomics* agenda with a new economic policy taskforce. Abe 2.0's stable premiership demonstrated that he had learnt from past mistakes.

But Abe learnt also from what he understood as his past successes. Differently from virtually all other policy fields, Abe reappointed *exactly* the same foreign policy executive within the premises of *Kantei* and MOFA. It could be argued that the pool of talent around Abe is limited and that not all of the re-appointed mandarins were selected because of their good performance but because there were no alternatives. Indeed, Hosoya Yūichi suggests that the rise of a particular strand of diplomats within MOFA, at the expenses of the so-called 'Asianists', is a structural factor in Japanese bureaucratic politics (Hosoya, 2011). Yet, evidence of political appointments and demotions –detailed below– prove that Abe cherry picked talent. This is a strong indication of his ideological preferences and of his appreciation of diplomatic results during his first term, because firsthand vindication of personal beliefs is a powerful driver of human behavior (Jervis, 1976: 239-248).

Shortly, Abe 2.0's firm security agenda premised not only on the Premier's worldview, but also on earlier personal and DPJ interaction with Beijing. As posited elsewhere, back in 2006 China accommodated to an increasingly assertive and still economically vital Japan (Pugliese, 2015a: 50-55). Since Abe understood that Beijing's softened position in the mid-2000s was a result of Japan's hardened stance, the bilateral tension Abe confronted over the Senkaku/Diaoyu standoff required a forceful reprise of earlier balancing strategies; shortly, power politics and the recovery of Japan's great power status was part of a toolkit that would allow Tokyo to negotiate with Beijing on a position of strength. Moreover, Abe was conscious of the diplomatic debacles Japan had suffered under the well-intentioned DPJ administrations, confirming his belief that Chinese policymakers respected strength and that concessions would only embolden them. China's economic woes since at least 2013 and the destabilizing spillover effects on regime stability convinced Abe and his foreign policy team that China still depended more on Japan rather than vice-versa (Tsugami, 2013). Successful personal experience, recent DPJ governments' failure, and China's slowing economic growth crystallized Abe's policy beliefs. The next section aims at understanding the policy-making mechanisms tapped by Abe.

3. Operationalizing Abe's Hybrid Leadership

After highlighting Abe's consistent policy desiderata, how did Abe concretely operate during his first and second administrations? He did so through a combination of old and new sources of policy change. After all, Japanese Prime Ministers may cap institutional sources of authority to catalyze Cabinet members and government agencies' support, at both the policy formulation and implementation stages.

3.1 Sources of Policy Change: Personnel Appointments and Demotions

The most important source of authority has been the right over personnel management (*jintai ken*). The Prime Minister who made full use of this right was post-war Premier Yoshida Shigeru, who fully appropriated himself of the institutional prerogatives on personnel appointment and dismissal vis-à-vis both cabinet members and bureaucratic powerholders (Watanabe, 1961: 87-88). Abe's hybrid leadership rested on the bureaucratic machine, but he made sure it toed his line through forceful micromanagement of bureaucratic and Cabinet appointments. Upon ascending to the premiership in 2006 Abe extended Yachi Shōtarō's mandate as Administrative Vice-Minister (AVM) while establishing a Cabinet of close political allies. This was indicative of the 21st Century Zeitgeist, where political and ideological proximity have become key aspects to the assignment of top bureaucratic postings and of politically-oriented demotions.

Differently from Yoshida's one-man show, 'Abe-diplomacy' was *de facto* entrusted to Yachi, who was hailed as Foreign Minister (FM) Asō Tarō and Abe's foreign policy brain. Abe deeply trusted Yachi and maintained exclusive communication channels with him at MOFA, especially on Japan's China policy (Shimizu, 2008: 71-73; US Embassy in Beijing, 2007). Indeed, Abe's former tutor Hirasawa Katsuei revealed that: 'Abe communicated only with one person at MOFA: Vice Minister Yachi, and froze all others out' (US Embassy in Tokyo, 2006f). Primary sources suggest that he was very much the man in charge in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and paved the way to the Abe administration's security initiatives. Indeed, Yachi was at the center of the Abe foreign policy executive and was later appointed as Cabinet Counsellor (2012-2013) and as Head of the National Security Secretariat (2014~), within the newly established National Security Council. Yachi's hyper-empowered role suggests that Abe's leadership functioned through a hybrid model, where Kantei delegated responsibility to likeminded individuals within

the bureaucratic apparatus. Notably, Yachi himself recognized that his views were a minority in the stiffly risk-adverse bureaucratic establishment (Yachi, 2009: 15-18); the Kantei link empowered Yachi.

Yachi's mandate at MOFA represented a fundamental development in Japanese policy-making: the personalization and politicization of bureaucratic rule of post-war Japanese diplomacy. Differently, from the consensus-driven approach highlighted by the traditional literature, evidence shows that Yachi was the driver of idiosyncratic policy change during the mid-2000s. Strong of CCS Abe's blessing, Yachi made full use of intra-MOFA personnel appointments and *China* was the target of these already in 2006. In August 2006, Yachi appointed as head of the China and Mongolia Division, a post normally held by 'China-sympathetic' diplomats from the 'China School', Akiba Takeo, a close 'American School' diplomat with a penchant for strategic diplomacy (Akasaka, 2006: 234; Shimizu, 2008: 71). Mandarin proficient China School career diplomats have extensive experience in Chinese affairs and 'first and foremost believe in good neighborly friendship with China. Even after retirement from the Foreign Ministry, they speak positively about relations with China through involvement as part of the pro-China faction' (Sasajima, 2002:83). It was the first time a non-China School official headed that particular division since the normalization of bilateral relations in 1972; such appointment was all the more significant because of the historical juncture in Sino-Japanese relations and proves the Yachi-led intra-agency shift. Moreover, the specific instance is consistent with Abe's earlier noted criticism of China hands, for their tendency to being sympathetic with the CCP plights. For these reasons, Akiba was in charge of the Division and, strategically, of the recruitment of new China school career diplomats.

Following Abe's comeback personnel appointment prerogative gained crescendo with Abe 2.0's bestowing of the Kantei's Cabinet Legislative Bureau directorship to Kōmatsu Ichirō, a diplomat sympathetic to constitutional reinterpretation endowing Japan with the right of Collective Self-Defense through executive fiat (Asahi, 2 August 2013). Specific to diplomacy, interviewees confirmed that Abe willingly appointed political lightweights to head the ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, because these were much his turf.³ While Abe 2.0 installed his foreign policy

³ In comparison, evidence suggests that back in 2006 Foreign Minister Asō enjoyed a substantial clout within MOFA, hinting at an Abe-Asō-Yachi triumvirate. Only the opening of Japanese diplomatic archives will confirm Asō's leadership, but it is worth noticing that Abe very much trusted the conservative Foreign Minister, whose mandate he extended upon ascension to the premiership.

executive within the premises of Kantei, coordination with MOFA was still central. The forceful external balancing blueprint was consistent throughout, and its creators resided in Kantei, but MOFA was central at the implementation level; that is why, in 2013, Abe installed a trusted and conservative ‘Yachi school’ diplomat, Saiki Akitaka, as AVM there. It was again indicative of MOFA’s importance and of Abe’s idiosyncratic agenda that he ‘promoted (to get out of the way)’ the mild and ‘Asianist’ Kawai Chikao to act as Grand Chamberlain of the Imperial Household Agency. This was after only nine months from his ascension to the AVM seat under the earlier Noda Yoshihiko administration. According to US and Japanese interviewees, Kawai was lukewarm to Abe’s more forceful external balancing overtures, especially the quad initiative and the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’s neo-conservative overtones (Interview, 2013b; Interview 2013c). The presence of a close Abe ally within MOFA meant that the machine toed with greater consistency Abe’s line, as it did during Abe 1.0. In other words, hybrid Kantei leadership functioned in tandem with a personalized and politicized bureaucracy.

Abe’s hybrid leadership functioned also through outright punishment of bureaucrats who went against the Kantei tide. Abe’s decision in late 2006 to emasculate Ambassador Nishida Tsuneo’s prerogatives as Deputy Foreign Minister (DFM) and to neutralize his career was a case in point. In fact, Nishida was a career diplomat expected to succeed Yachi, but he incurred into Abe’s and Asō’s ire in the aftermath of the July 5 North Korean missile tests. Through a division of labor, then-CCS Abe and FM Asō successfully cajoled Washington and the members of the United Nations Security Council for sanctions against the DPRK (Shinoda, 2009: 103-105; US Embassy in Tokyo, 2006d). This episode testifies not only to the importance of the Abe-Asō duo but also of Abe’s retaliation for DFM Nishida’s unwillingness to press for sanctions at the UNSC (Facta, 2012; Asahi, 15 December 2006). Abe’s very public punishment of Nishida –one that included the humiliation of not including him in the surprise visit to China in October 2006, a first for a DFM (Diet of Japan, 2006)– was meant as a display of his seemingly presidential prerogatives to educate other members of the bureaucracy of the merits of toing his line, because he reportedly did not trust most of the MOFA apparatus (US Embassy in Tokyo, 2006f). It was all the more revelatory of Abe’s interests that the demotion targeted a high-ranking MOFA official, whose original protégé, Kanehara Nobukatsu, was instrumental to the birth of the ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity’ (AFP). Nishida’s demotion and the extension of Yachi’s mandate endowed the conception with a balancing component that came close to outright China containment.

3.2 Policy Formulation: the Yachi-led Foreign Policy Executive and the US link

The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity concept was engineered by Kanehara, then Head of MOFA's General Policy Coordination Division in the Foreign Policy Bureau. In fact, in line with the hybrid model of prime ministerial leadership, a less-noted, but consequential institutional reform in foreign policy-making in the post-Cold War years bridged MOFA with the Premier. Following the 1992 trauma of international and US criticism over Japan's non-military aid to the Gulf War an advisory panel proposed the creation of a Foreign Policy Bureau within MOFA that would have 'coordinated and harmonized the regional policies from a unified vantage point, as well as aiming at policy-making from a comprehensive and mid-to-long term range' (Tanaka, 2009: 59). In other words, the Foreign Policy Bureau is in charge of analyzing the strategic environment and crafting the general security policy, in tandem with the Security Division of the North American Bureau. With time, the Bureau became central for long-term strategy in tandem with the *Kantei*. However, with Abe's comeback and the enactment of the NSC, the Prime Minister's office would appropriate itself the prerogatives for long term strategy, as demonstrated by Kanehara's rise to the ranks of Assistant Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary and Deputy Head of the National Security Secretariat and by the formulation of a National Security Strategy through an ad hoc blue-ribbon panel chaired by Yachi.

A scholar-cum-diplomat, Kanehara Nobukatasu, claimed that the Arc would have constituted Japan's Grand Strategy for the 21st Century (Kanehara, 2011; Hosoya, 2011). Yet, it was thanks to Yachi's clout that Kanehara would later ascend the MOFA and Kantei ladder by entering Yachi's protective wing. This was done by virtue of Yachi's strong political connections with the conservative political camp, and thanks to a shared appreciation for strategy over short-term policy. But the concept would not survive Abe's and Asō's fall from grace in late 2007, because of opposition from within *both* MOFA and a new Kantei led by Fukuda Yasuo.

Interestingly, Kanehara was DFM Nishida's protégé, who initially suggested Kanehara's promotion to the position of Head of the Policy Coordination Division (interview, 2014e). Yachi knew well and respected Kanehara and seconded Nishida's proposal. Given the strategic importance of the office, Kanehara's rapport with Yachi becomes formidably strong and receives a career boost by virtue of the MOFA-*Kantei* link embedded in the Policy Coordination and Policy Planning divisions. Moreover, since the Director General of the Foreign Policy Bureau at the time

was ‘not a strategist’ and demonstrated no results, Kanehara’s shadow grew even further (Interview, 2014b). At any rate, in the author’s opinion, Kanehara ought not to be qualified as the sole creator of the AFP because the eventual more assertive colors likely betrayed Yachi’s input. The final product was necessarily a synthesis of idealistic preferences for universal values and geopolitics (Interview, 2013d).

In the author’s view, the original creator of the concept toed with greater emphasis the Abe and Yachi line, possibly because ‘it is well-known among MOFA officials that those who do not belong to the Yachi grouping will be unable to get to the vice minister’s post’ (Akasaka, 2006: 234). In fact, Kanehara’s penchants originally emphasized a teleological historicism where a status-quo democratic Japan would have preserved global stability. In a sense, Kanehara advanced a defensive realist strategy, but the AFP concept would assume a logic rooted in a more assertive strand of balancing.

At the same time, the AFP embodies the complicated genealogy proper of the aforementioned hybrid leadership: strong of political blessings from Asō and Abe, MOFA crafted a strategy that seemingly echoed US policy desiderata. The umbilical cord that nourished the creation of the AFP grandiose strategic overtures was the American link. Between 2004 and June 2006 Kanehara was visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution and subsequently Minister at the US Embassy in Washington DC. This timing coincided with the George W. Bush administration’s increased insistence on universal values and the AFP became a posterchild for the landmark February 2005 Japan-US Security Consultative Committee, where the two countries agreed to bolster their security ties. Around the same time the US pressed early on in 2005 for the President’s Asia Democratization Initiative, which, however, never materialized during the second Bush administration (US Embassy in Tokyo, 2005). In other words, so strong was the need for the Abe foreign policy team to balance China that strategic coordination with its ally was paramount, love calls echoed the George W. Bush administration’s neo-conservative penchants and were instrumental to cementing the Trans-pacific entente. In fact, almost all of former and present MOFA interviewees agree in stating that the ‘The Arc of Freedom and Prosperity was meant to appeal to the US and US leadership’ (Interview, 2013e; 2014b; 2013b). US-Japan alliance manager from the first George W. Bush administration, Michael Green, goes as far as saying that: “With regard to the Bush administration, yes I think I am the first person to use the word ‘*kachikan gaikō*’ (i.e. values-based diplomacy) with Abe and there is a certain degree of importing from the US”

(Interview, 2013b). Deepening bilateral strategic inter-operability between Tokyo and Washington also went through similar discourses.

Another fundamental aspect of the Abe-blessed and Yachi-led revolution in foreign and security policy was the hiring of a conservative journalist-cum-scholar as an in-house speechwriter at MOFA. Taniguchi Tomohiko became central in crafting what Kanehara and Abe came to refer to as a ‘declarative foreign policy’ (*shuchō suru gaikō*), and was responsible for propping up the global standing of Asō and, with time, Abe. Thus, for the first time in post-war Japan’s history, Yachi appointed in October 2005 a speechwriter who did not hail originally from MOFA and whose craft became an integral part of the policy-making process. Previous external input provided by famous public intellectuals or commentators, in fact, came only on an *ad hoc* basis (Interview, 2014c). Taniguchi’s appointment was integral to the written formulation of key strategic objectives for Japanese foreign policy, including, Asō’s public formulation of the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity as a new pillar of Japanese foreign policy.

But there was another component that aimed at molding Japanese identity in marked contrast with a rising autocratic China and in affinity with the US. It was all the more indicative that Professor Taniguchi demonstrated an explicit appreciation for acting as an identity entrepreneur, according to which the speeches reflected a need to ‘infuse the Japanese people with confidence [and] insist on discourses on Japan’s freedom and democracy’. Reflecting the Abe administration’s desire to cement the US-Japan alliance in marked contrast with China, Taniguchi pondered that some of the speeches he wrote aimed at spelling out what constituted the ‘new type of Japanese; those who would have provided a moral leadership’ with foreign and domestic audiences in mind (Interview, 2014c).

Remarkably, Taniguchi’s speeches for Asō and Abe perfectly complemented with Kanehara’s values-centered historicism, possibly also because Taniguchi preceded Kanehara as a visiting fellow at Brookings and became close to him, when Kanehara was appointed as Minister in the Japanese Embassy in Washington. This relational network would eventually crystallize in a Yachi-led foreign policy executive that would bring about a remarkable consistence in foreign and declarative policy change during Abe’s first and second administrations: from the onset of the second Abe administration, Taniguchi would follow Yachi and Kanehara at *Kantei*, where he acted as special Cabinet Counsellor. Eventually, Abe’s Foreign Policy based on a Panoramic Perspective of the World-Map became the AFP under a different guise, as recounted by Yachi (Yachi, 2013).

Yet, it is worth recounting that the policy and declaratory changes that Abe 2.0 built upon were initiated under his first premiership but through a politicized link connecting Kantei with MOFA and echoing US discourses also for rational political calculus.

3.3 Policy Implementation: Abe 1.0 and 2.0's Values-Based External Balancing

Informed by US foreign policy and strong of Abe's blessings, a Yachi-led MOFA formulated its China balancing foreign policy. But how did policy formulation translate into concrete policy change back in 2006/7 and since 2012, and how does it corroborate Abe's hybrid leadership? Small changes in the language register of Abe's diplomatic declarations constitute primary evidence of this. Emphasis on universal values was consistent throughout the two Abe administrations. Abe borrowed almost verbatim Washington's language register to promote freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Abe, 2006: 62-70). In fact, Abe's calculus was nationalistic: the insistence on values sugarcoated Japan's identity with the mantle of political modernity to reassert Japan's primacy in Asia – in stark contrast with autocratic China; moreover, the Japanese government instrumentalized values to forcefully hug the US and augment its China balancing potential. Moreover, the new 'values-based' vocabulary tamed Abe's persona for foreign and domestic consumption, while his personal political philosophy was premised, on the contrary, on the primacy of the state over the individual and on Japan's cultural exceptionalism.

To be sure, at the dawn of the 21st Century Japan already came to redefine its identity vis-à-vis China in new and, often, adversarial ways. Kai Schulze, for instance, has demonstrated Japan's re-discovery of its democratic identity – Asia's oldest – in direct relation with autocratic China's rise to regional economic primacy (Schulze, 2015: 101-116). But these characterizations soaked Japanese official government pronouncements only after the advent of Abe 1.0 and Abe 2.0. Following the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu standoff, the state-led value chasm widened even further following the consolidation of power of the Abe administration with evidence pointing at the active engagement of the Prime Minister's Office (Pugliese, 2015a: 76-93).

The two Abe administrations sought to establish the legitimacy of Japan's standing as a status quo Great Power, which consistently upheld the US-centered postwar liberal order. These discourses later intended to undermine China's unilateral claims in its multiple territorial disputes as attempts to erode the foundations of such a liberal order and, now and then, to legitimize the

overtures to the afore-mentioned strategic partners. These principles condoned, for instance, the 2005 US-India civil nuclear deal that contravened the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime; Japan needed small cajoling to bless the ‘largest democracy in the world’-exception to the NPT, because said democracy was a key chess piece to balance against China.

Importantly, the second Abe administration actively re-molded these antagonistic narratives, often in *new* ways and with clear political aims that betrayed the instrumentalist nature of such discourses. In fact, Abe’s 2014 well-crafted keynote speech at the premium venue for security dialogue in the Asia-Pacific, the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Shangri-La Dialogue, masterfully encapsulated Tokyo’s new configuration of Japan’s identity vis-à-vis Beijing with a new found emphasis on the rule of law. It was indicative of the Kantei-led clout over declaratory policy change that Taniguchi was responsible for the well-crafted speech. In fact, its conclusion encapsulates the leitmotifs: ‘Japan for the rule of law. Asia for the rule of law. And the rule of law for all of us. Peace and prosperity in Asia, for evermore’ (Abe, 2014). In 2013 Former Ambassador to Beijing Miyamoto Yūji, then special counsellor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explicated the clear geo-political implications of Japan’s new message: ‘How many states can take Japan’s side if we insist on universal values alone? [...] honestly, Central Asian states, Vietnam and Myanmar are not generally in favor of universal values’ (Interview, 2013f). Tokyo’s parallel strategic overtures to Russia and Moscow’s earlier protests of Abe’s earlier insistence on universal values were another incentive to altogether change the language register (Yachi, 2009: 144-146). But it was probably not a chance that Tokyo toned down its former insistence on universal values during the Asō premiership in 2008-2009. Compared to the George W. Bush administration, Barack Obama’s less values-based foreign policy course (Mann, 2004; Mann 2012) arguably impacted on Tokyo’s language register calculations.

Specific to external balancing policy change, the case of Australia is indicative of the AFP complicated genealogy and of Tokyo’s forceful security overtures through the active intercession of the US, the added driver of Abe’s hybrid leadership. This was true of 2006 as of 2013 onwards. The landmark 2007 *Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation* reflected the workings of a Yachi-led push inaugurated in 2005/2006 that functioned in tandem with US push for cooperation among its major Asia-Pacific allies. While Australia is a middle power, it still qualified as a key chess piece for MOFA’s Asia strategy, but it is indicative that Kanehara and MOFA did not include Australia within the AFP scope, while Yachi did (Interview, 2013d; Yachi,

2009; MOFA, 2007). The above-mentioned divide exemplified Yachi's more explicit geopolitical penchants. At the operational level, a cursory examination of Diet deliberations in 2005-2007, intra-LDP Policy Affairs Research Council committee agendas, and Cabinet meeting agendas, show that security cooperation with Australia was *never* discussed. Direct testimonies from Japanese and US policymakers testify, in fact, that MOFA was in control of the policymaking process bolstering security relations between Tokyo and Canberra and Asō and Abe's blessing was instrumental in giving mandarins the green light for said changes. In fact, like-minded policymakers such as Yachi and Kanehara were key middlemen (Anno, 2011: 31-32; Interview, 2014d; Interview, 2013e).

Former Senior Director for Asian Affairs at the NSC, Michael Green, went as far as qualifying the United States as the middleman in the "arranged marriage" (*omiai*) between Australia and Japan back in the mid-2000s. US efforts were reinforced when Bush transferred former Ambassador to Canberra, Thomas Schieffer, to Japan to smooth the road to security partnership between Tokyo and Canberra (Interview, 2013b). The very visible hand of the US actively interceded in deepening security partnerships throughout the Asia-Pacific; in fact, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage echoed Green with regard to deepened India-Japan relations: 'we were the mid wife, we were the marriage broker' (interview, 2014f).

It's all the more telling of the echoes of history and of the exact same policy dynamics, that in 2014, the forceful neo-conservative premiership of Tony Abbott responded with enthusiasm to Tokyo and Washington's calls for deeper security cooperation. The further deepening of the Japan-Australia security partnership under the Abbott and Abe administrations, was *déjà vu* all over again and indicative of Japan's hybrid leadership. That key powerbrokers in Abe's foreign policy executive now resided within the Prime Minister's office hinted at the newfound leverage enjoyed by the Prime Minister's Office. While they were playing by the same China balancing book, the new-born National Security Council within the *Kantei* premises was in charge of policy formulation, while MOFA was in charge of policy implementation.

4. Conclusions: Widened Perimeters for Japanese Leadership?

The personal attributes of Abe and his confidantes impacted greatly upon the interaction with structure, style and policy outcomes. The Japanese government's attempted China policies

followed closely along the penchants of Abe and his entourage. Yet, this paper has demystified the traditional leader-centered accounts on Japanese diplomacy along a more inclusive picture that operationalizes it through the bureaucratic machine, specifically MOFA, and the key formative presence of the US ally.

With regard to the latter, it would be mistaken, however, to present an image of a Japanese state as reactive or altogether subservient to the cultural and discursive hegemony of the United States. Indeed, Abe 1.0 and, especially, Abe 2.0 have pushed for a markedly more balancing prone foreign policy that increasingly prompted Washington's fears of entrapment. Nationalist Abe's insistence on values and deepened ties with Washington aims especially at hugging the US to enhance the China coercive toolkit at Tokyo's disposal. Since Washington does not share Abe's heightened threat perception vis-a-vis China, there's a true risk that the US will not follow through a more confrontational foreign policy: this was true in 2007, when Washington publicly called for an end to the quad initiative, as it has been until early 2014, when the Obama administration did reciprocate to Chinese calls for a 'new type of great power relationship' and feared entanglement in a Sino-Japanese confrontation of Tokyo's making. US foreign policy remains key in informing Japan's foreign and security policy calculations, but Japan under Abe was the proverbial tail that aimed at wagging the US dog against China.

Abe made full use of traditional prime ministerial prerogatives, such as the right of personnel appointment, but not at the expenses of altogether sidelining the bureaucratic machine from the policymaking process. Through trusted strategist and factotum Yachi, the Premier steered MOFA in his preferred direction. MOFA personnel appointments in mid-2016 confirmed the dynamics recounted in this study: there was an evident bias against China expertise and in favor of American School diplomats, and important positions were awarded to 'Yachi School' officials, such as Akiba Takeo's early promotion to the DFM position from directorship of the Foreign Policy Bureau, the strategic office that bridges Kantei with MOFA. (Suzuki, 2016). Abe leadership was not simply top-down: it went through the increasingly personalized and politicized link within the bureaucracy. On the contrary, as the case of Hatoyama Yukio premiership has shown, lack of coordination with the bureaucratic apparatus can result in policy failure, if not active sabotage of a Prime Minister's policy agenda (Zakowski, 2015: 64-105).

Finally, with regard to the bureaucratic machine's clout over foreign policy-making, as exemplified by MOFA, the newly-minted NSC is gradually relegating MOFA to an

implementation agency: the Kantei is dramatically widening its scope of action. After all, China's decision in July 2015 to showcase Yachi's meeting with its second highest-ranking government official, Premier Li Keqiang, was an unusual one, because the disregard for the traditionally stiff CCP pecking order was symptomatic of the substantial clout enjoyed by Yachi and the NSC Secretariat he led (Sankei Shinbun, 23 July 2015). In other words, only time will tell whether Abe's increasingly presidential Kantei will be a mainstay of Japanese foreign and security policy. But it is indicative of MOFA's clout, and of Yachi's leverage, that the NSS was staffed especially with trusted MOFA cadres: the link with the politicized bureaucratic machine was still in plain sight.

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